



PRACTITIONER NOTE SERIES:

The Purist's Partnership: Debunking the Terminology of Partnerships¹

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This paper looks at the current rhetoric surrounding partnerships. Given that partnership language frames expectations, being honest about the challenges of multi-sector partnerships is the only way to ensure that partnerships are used most effectively.

In corporate, public sector and NGO literature, the term partnership is used to describe many different kinds of relationships. The lines are often blurred between the vast spectrum of sponsorship to contracts to arrangements based on mutual need. Given the current confusion around public-private partnerships in the provision of public services, whereby contracts, rather than any deeper interrelationship, define the terms by which the public sector and private sector engage, a crusade of sorts is needed to force a greater rigour and accuracy on the use of the term "partnership". Though still very early days in the formation of multi-sector partnerships, expectations (and rhetoric) run high while the reality lags well behind.

Public pronouncements about partnership from officials of all sectors repeatedly refer to phrases such as trust, common vision, and voluntary commitment. Although literature *on partnerships* has redressed many of these issues, the literature *of partners* often promotes that partnership (given the undeniably positive connotation of the word itself) is by its very nature a harmonious undertaking. These concepts are misleading at best and at worst do not actually apply to cross-sector partnerships at all.

This paper tries to set the record straight. Correcting our language around partnerships is not merely an academic or pedantic

exercise but rather of the utmost necessity, particularly as the use of the term partnership reaches near pandemic proportions. Terminology frames our expectations and expectations are usually the source of frustrations. A lack of intellectual honesty also provides enormous channels for sceptics rightfully to undermine some very successful partnership work in a variety of fields.

While partnerships hold enormous promise, they are not the panacea to sustainable development as some contend. Rather if the foundations are solid and our expectations realistic about how challenging they are, they are a serious tool in the toolbox. Tools though may only be needed to build the project. Partnerships in and of themselves need not be sustainable; it is the activities or projects that organisations undertake together in partnership that hopefully will be.

The Vision Thing

Cross-sector partnerships are by their very nature unnatural relationships. They bring together very disparate groups (public, private, donor and civil society) to work jointly on a project. It is often suggested that a common vision, mission, goal or overarching objective is necessary to forge a team spirit and create common understanding that will henceforth provide the basis for an overarching framework between partners.

Coming from the side of the purist (or perhaps, more accurately, the sceptic), such glorious harmony is unreachable and in fact counterproductive. It is unreachable because the points of reference for different sectors are different. This suggests that a common understanding of terms like "sustainability" is unlikely. For example, in water projects, sustainability for the private sector has some

¹Debunking is colloquial for "exposing something as false."

relationship to cost recovery, for NGOs it has a bearing on empowerment and community voice, and for the public sector it generally means technically sound and thus not needing to be addressed again in the future. These are not mutually exclusive concepts but they are significantly different starting points.

Whilst the efforts to get there might be revealing, common vision in this broad sense usually masks the individual aspirations of each participating organisation and/or be so watered down as to be fairly useless in the name of facilitating group identity and purpose. The ultimate end is that no one owns the mission statement since the meaning enshrined therein is too general and the attempts to combine everyone's interest too negotiated. Striving for a partnership mission statement also exacerbates the tension for the individuals involved in representing the partnership to their own institutions and their own institution to the partnership.

Challenging enough to formulate, a common understanding of the "project" is absolutely critical (i.e. 400 water taps installed in a community, the building of a health care centre, etc.). Processes to reach clarity around expectations and risks for each individual and organisation engaging in the partnership (and hence the project) is far more critical than common vision.

Core Complementary Competencies

Some suggest that cross-sector partnerships are based on the concept of Core Complementary Competencies. The premise is that organisations should stick to what is most integral to their operations (their Core Business), contribute what they do best (their Key Competencies), and determine which of these core competencies appropriately add value to what each of the other participating organisations are contributing (Complementary Contribution). This concept is absolutely critical to understanding who should do what, however, the practice is rarely so straightforward.

Organisations that come together in this way in reality often compete for what they want to contribute. As examples, while an NGO might have community outreach skills and local knowledge, a company also builds up these competencies through their customer care and the public sector through their local mandate. While the public sector suggests

that they are ultimately responsible for monitoring and evaluation of the project, NGOs often serve in a watchdog (i.e. monitoring) capacity, and companies monitor and evaluate as a matter of refining business plans and practice. "Clear divisions of labour" mask the competition from which both individuals and institutions enter into partnership relationships.

Similarly an emphasis on Core Complementary Competencies fails to recognise the inherent disregard for what partner organisations might do better. Companies often are least willing to acknowledge the competencies of their partners, most likely to sub-contract in the skills that are needed, and thus most likely to undermine the innovation that can be brought to bear by bringing the different partners together. NGOs are often unwilling to narrow down their "core business" for fear of missing out on opportunities. And sadly, the public sector is rarely given much credit for attempting to manage or oversee the holistic picture for which governments are responsible (water, education, health, transportation, environment, and so on).

Trust vs. Respect

In much of the literature, "trust" looms large in defining what is needed to build solid partnerships. Refuting this concept is much like refuting a universal truth; many people question how can you have a partnership in which partners do not trust each other? Firstly, distinctions need to be made between trust between individuals and trust between institutions. Would Mr. Y from Anyold Company and Ms. B from Thisorthat NGO trust each other after several years of working together? Perhaps. More likely however, they have built up mutual respect for what each organisation and each individual can offer to the project and hence the partnership. When Mr. Y leaves the company, does Anyold Company trust Thisorthat NGO? Probably not. Relationships start over (sometimes from the beginning, sometimes from even before the beginning reviewing the entire foundations) when new individuals come in, hence the literature rightfully also emphasises the importance of institutionalisation and buy-in in some form or another.

Some caveats may apply. In cases where there is an option to choose your partner, this may allow the opportunity to emphasise trust.

(More often than not however, the choices are limited - there might be one company, one NGO working in a specific community, and certainly only one municipality in that area.) In relations directly with the community, whether with local officials, an NGO, or a company, trust must be fostered. (This relationship, often the purview of NGOs, is different largely as a function of the expectations of the community.)

Perhaps more useful efforts can be placed on ensuring that there is an understanding and hence respect for what partner organisations can deliver and the obstacles that they face in either partnering in the first place or delivering what they said they would deliver. Individuals may or may not trust each other. Perhaps they trust their partners to behave in a certain way, rather than that they will trust their partners to always put the partnership first. The distinction is an important one, again given how we frame our expectations of our partners.

Similarly, successful partnerships are expected to reflect a certain chemistry between the individuals involved. Again, this would certainly seem appropriate as a guiding principle for partnerships where partners have the luxury to choose one another. Perhaps chemistry though is over-rated in situations where there is no choice as to with whom you must partner. Relationships may bloom quicker and partnerships produce results or impacts more effectively if the individuals sitting around the table like each other. Sometimes, though, this might be too much to wish for and partners just need to find mechanisms to get on with the business of negotiating, implementing and reviewing their work together.

Voluntary vs. Obligatory

We often hear that partnerships are voluntary - that no one is forcing an organisation to join in a partnership. The term voluntary has a few different (albeit related) meanings. It can mean “willingly” or “optional”. Dissecting these meanings in relation to partnership presents some challenges:

- ◆ *Willingly* - Willingly suggests a certain passive and painless contribution with very little need for compromise. British Airways collecting coins from passengers to pass on to charity is a painless way of making everyone feel good about putting in money to "make a

difference". Perhaps this is a partnership, but it is not nearly so complicated or threatening as others.

- ◆ *Optional* - Given the challenges that such relationships face, the hard work that they require, and the commitments that must be forthcoming, if cross-sector partnerships were optional, very few organisations would engage in them.

The purist's partnership must be based on mutual need that relates to some limitation on the part of that organisation to meet their core business interests. Core business can be defined in many ways though including unwritten "contracts" with shareholders, communities, the electorate, or otherwise. A social license to operate is critical for many companies and protecting it certainly represents a core business interest.

"Voluntary" fails to capture either the critical nature of the contribution, the urgency that brought the partners together in the first place, the impact that my organisation's absence in the project might have on our activities in the future, or the challenges that these types of relationships pose. In another light, the term voluntary might relate to the initial decision by a specific individual to engage, but once that decision has been taken, there is an obligation to fulfil commitments and walking away is not without costs (be they in monetary terms, reputation, or otherwise).²

Outputs vs. Outcomes

Indeed partnerships can enhance outputs. It might take longer but through a partnership more water points can be installed in a community. However, partnerships are not the only mechanism for installing more water points. Donors could fund the company or an NGO to put in more water points, the company could make a “social investment” to install more taps, or the communities could save money to install taps themselves. For any number of reasons though, one, two or three years down the line, these taps may no longer be functioning. The presumption is that partnerships lead to more sustainable

² One cannot deny the challenges individuals face as the interface in partnerships. Admittedly this Practitioner Note implies but does not sufficiently delve into the role of individuals (as opposed to organizations, more broadly). This will be the subject of a separate piece forthcoming from the BPD.

"projects" or outputs - bringing synergies together in order to innovate for the long-term.

Outputs are tangibles that we can see - water taps, a report, the number of times an advocacy message is repeated on the television or radio, the number of children vaccinated, etc. We tend to stop after we have counted all the outputs of the partnership (which in fact may have been completed as suggested above by other means even quicker).

Partnership projects, by the sheer virtue of bringing together so many different forms of contributions, should place equal emphasis on the outcomes. Outcomes are the less tangible results - how many children can now attend school because they are not walking for 4 miles a day for water; how policies have been changed in a company or legislation amended as a result of findings documented in a report; how behaviour has changed as a result of hearing a message repeatedly; or estimates of how much money has been saved in curative care as a result of vaccinations being given to children.

In cross-sector partnerships, failing to focus openly and clearly on the expected outcomes for each partner organisation is where the disappointment and the crossed expectations become most prevalent. The question becomes "what is the partnership really trying to achieve?" rather than what is it trying to produce. Determining the outcomes also helps to define who is better placed to deliver or lead on specific project components. Usually the negotiations around outcomes present greatest cause for compromise, (which presumably is where greatest impacts on organisational behaviour occur).

Contracts are often to blame for the emphasis on outputs or deliverables. Contracts ultimately dictate the terms of the project and hence the terms of the interaction between the partners. They often also explicitly reveal some issues around balance of power - particularly when one partner is providing the funding. In such cases, can we describe these relationships as partnerships in the purist sense? Perhaps the nature of the dialogue that occurred to produce the contract would suggest whether the relationship was based on an equal footing. Perhaps how frequently the document is reviewed to ensure that it still meets the needs of all partners, or reflects the actual interaction of the partners in

implementing the project, must be taken into consideration. The challenge is to find documents and mechanisms that bind organisations together in partnership but still allow for flexibility in the evolution of that relationship.

The Purist's Partnership

So what is the purist's partnership? The purist's partnership must be something that is fundamentally based on, recognises and incorporates aspirations and expectations of each individual involved and each partner organisation. Although this seems obvious, too often partnerships couch the project in negotiated middle ground that forms an ineffectual, unobjectionable "mutual goal." Mutual agreement is fine for defining the project, or the outputs, but must recognise that the expected outcomes will probably be different for different partner organisations.

Partnerships must be based on need – some end result that could not be achieved by one organisation on its own. Furthermore, the outputs and outcomes have to be critical to the way each organisation operates or its core business, regardless of the kind of organisation – public, private or civil society. The most effective partnerships would thereby be tied with no uncertainty to the core business, or core interests, of each organisation that comes to the table. This pertains equally to the communities or beneficiaries - the partnership project has to be a priority for them too. Put more crudely, if a "business" case for each partner (more broadly than in strict financial terms) can not be made convincingly, then forget it.

Whilst the tone of this paper may be overly critical, the rhetoric surrounding partnerships requires that we take another look – that we are honest about the challenges that cross-sectoral partnerships face. Cross-sector partnerships hold enormous promise, but only if we start from an honest assessment of what they are, how they function, and what we should expect from them. Otherwise they will very quickly erode into an exercise in tokenism or rebranding and one day in the near future fall out of fashion.

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